

The Reform of Military Education: Twenty-Five Years Later

by Joan Johnson-Freese

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***Abstract:** When considering how to make the war colleges more effective, it should be remembered that first and foremost, the job of the war colleges is to educate students to make them better defenders of the United States of America and its interests and its allies around the world. However, the author gives many recommendations on how these colleges can better educate, rather than train.*

It has been 25 years since the landmark 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act reformed U.S. national defense. Part of that important legislation specifically mandated guidelines for military education, with intent to open the military culture and to encourage intellectual integration with civilians and among the services themselves. This was followed by the “Skelton Panel,” chaired by Rep. Ike Skelton (D-MO). The idea behind both was simple, reflecting the classic wisdom that “the society that separates its scholars from its warriors will have its thinking done by cowards and its fighting done by fools.”¹ “Over a decade earlier, Admiral Stansfield Turner had similarly reformed the Naval War College (NWC), warning that if military officers could not hold their own with the best civilian strategists, the military would end up “abdicating control over its profession.”

In 2010 the House Armed Service Committee issued a report titled *Another Crossroads? Professional Military Education Twenty Years After the*

¹ United States House of Representatives, Subcommittee of the Committee on Armed Services, “Another Crossroads? Professional Military Education Twenty Years After the Goldwater-Nichols Act and the Skelton Panel,” H.A.S.C. publication No. 111-67, May 20, 2009. The quote about “fighting done by fools” is widely misattributed to Thucydides (as it is in the HASC report) but was actually penned by W.F. Butler in 1889.

Report Documentation Page			Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188		
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 2012		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2012 to 00-00-2012	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE The Reform of Military Education: Twenty-Five Years Later			5a. CONTRACT NUMBER		
			5b. GRANT NUMBER		
			5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER		
6. AUTHOR(S)			5d. PROJECT NUMBER		
			5e. TASK NUMBER		
			5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER		
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Foreign Policy Research Institute, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA, 19102-3684			8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER		
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)			10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)		
			11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)		
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES Orbis. Winter 2012, Volume 56, Number 1					
14. ABSTRACT When considering how to make the war colleges more effective, it should be remembered that first and foremost, the job of the war colleges is to educate students to make them better defenders of the United States of America and its interests and its allies around the world. However, the author gives many recommendations on how these colleges can better educate, rather than train.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 19	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

Goldwater-Nichols Act and the Skelton Panel. Perhaps most interesting was its focus on education toward intellectual agility:

...the current PME system should be improved to meet the country's needs of today and tomorrow. . . PME, therefore, must remain dynamic. It must respond to present needs and consistently anticipate those of the future. It must continuously evolve in order to imbue service members with the intellectual agility to assume expanded roles and to perform new missions in an ever dynamic and increasingly complicated security environment.²

Twenty-five years after Goldwater-Nichols, the U.S. military operates in perhaps the most complex environment it has ever faced. But was the Goldwater-Nichols mandate and the push for better military education successful? And if not, what might be done?

Training Versus Education

War colleges are part of the Professional Military Education (PME) system, a large complex of institutions including the Army War College in Carlisle Barracks, PA, the Naval War College in Newport, RI, the Air War College in Montgomery, AL, the Marine Corps War College in Quantico, VA, the National War College in Washington, DC, and the Industrial College of the Armed Forces (ICAF), also located in Washington, DC. While each institution has a distinct personality and individual strengths and weaknesses, all suffer to varying degrees from overriding institutional and cultural issues that hinder the educational goals intended by Congress when it passed Goldwater-Nichols. Several concerns have been raised by those who currently teach, or have taught, at the war colleges. Former Air War College professor Dan Hughes,³ former Army War College professor George Reed,⁴ former National War College professor Howard Wiarda,⁵ journalist Tom Ricks, and I have all published articles, books, or commentary raising issues regarding PME.⁶ Most of these have tried to discuss the problems, rather than to comprehensively consider fixes, although Ricks, for one, has advocated closing the Air War College on his well-read blog, a position with which I disagree. The frustration

² "Another Crossroads," p. vii.

³ Daniel Hughes, "Professors in the Colonels' World," in Douglas Higbee, ed., *Military Culture and Education* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010).

⁴ Dr. George E. Reed, "What Wrong and What's Right with the War Colleges," *DefensePolicy.Org* online, July 1, 2011, <http://www.defensepolicy.org/2011/george-reed/what%E2%80%9999s-wrong-and-right-with-the-war-colleges>.

⁵ Howard Wiarda, *Military Brass versus Civilian Academics at the National War College: Clash of Cultures* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011).

⁶ See also: Robert H. Scales, "Too Busy to Learn?" *Proceedings*, February 2010, <http://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2010-02/too-busy-learn>; Charles Allen, "Redress of Military Education: The Clarion Call," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 59, Fall 2010.

shown by Ricks and others with the inertia of the PME system, however, is understandable.⁷

General David Petraeus, the former commander of U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, and later CIA Director, has weighed in also, recalling his time as doctoral candidate at Princeton University. Petraeus considered Princeton both a humbling and useful experience—he once received a “D” on an exam and considered it an intellectual wake-up call—which he felt prepared him to be not just a top military thinker, but to compete with the best and brightest anywhere. He subsequently suggested that civilian schools were the proper venue for further officer education. Retired Army officer Ralph Peters dismissed Petraeus’s comments by asserting that civilian education is a waste of time; calling academics “theory poisoned and indecisive.” Peters views the primary value of PME as student networking.⁸

Neither the Joint Staff responsible for PME, nor the individual military services, have seriously tackled what education for intellectual agility, as opposed to training, would entail. This is not surprising, because few of those responsible for PME (individually or collectively) have spent much time thinking about the difference between education and training. Not many have reflected on what it means “to educate” or “to be educated.” Many received their undergraduate degrees in engineering, a discipline where rules, checklists, and clear, right and wrong answers prevail. They then went on to successful careers where risk-averse answers to their bosses’ questions are standard, and the same kinds of checklists for flights, ships and reactors apply. Such personnel are well trained, but that is not the same thing as being well educated. Unfortunately, training and education are seen by the military bureaucracy as almost synonymous. The Navy and the Air Force even group the two words together in the names of their respective commands: the Naval Education and Training Command (NETC) and the Air Education and Training Command (AETC).⁹

When training and education are viewed interchangeably, intellectual agility is sacrificed to training-friendly metrics. When I was a Naval War College department chair, for example, the academic departments were asked to provide metrics for “return on investment” for the Navy, in order to shorten the course, to speed up “throughput” of students, and to develop a curriculum teachable by virtually anyone. If training courses can run from 0800-1700 five days a week, we were asked, why can’t war college classes? Ironically, the Secretary of the Navy asked the same question in 1888, when he wondered why students weren’t finishing the Naval War College faster by taking classes

⁷ See: Tom Ricks, “Need Budget Cuts? We Can Probably Start By Shutting Down the Air War College,” *The Best Defense*, April 11, 2011.

⁸ David H. Petraeus, “Beyond the Cloister,” and Ralph Peters, “Learning to Lose,” *The American Interest*, July-August 2007. <http://www.the-american-interest.com/article.cfm?piece=290>.

⁹ See: <http://www.navy.mil/local/cnet/>, <http://www.aetc.af.mil/>.

on Saturday and Sunday. This question incensed the founders of the Naval War College, Alfred Thayer Mahan and Stephen B. Luce, who “were livid with anger,” according to a history of the College:

Not only did the Secretary of the Navy fail to understand the educational approach of the War College but he threatened its very existence. The college curriculum required large blocks of time for the students to read and to think actively about the abstract problems presented. It was not a course in which data was poured into the ears of students by a series of lectures. The lectures were only a stimulus to the main thrust of the college.¹⁰

Education, then as now, requires thinking and reflection, which takes time. Training has right and wrong answers which allow immediate progress measurement; education is incremental and involves grappling with ambiguity. Many other proposals aimed at the Naval War College in the past decade were contradictory: we were asked to shorten the course, for example, at the same time we were being asked if we could also teach languages, such as Arabic. Those questions were addressed rather easily, but they illustrate how often those in charge of military education are poorly informed about the nature of education.

This failure to differentiate between training and education is the issue that initially animated the kind of reforms intended by Goldwater-Nichols over two decades ago, and fundamentally represents a clash of cultures. Culture issues are always the most difficult to deal with in hybrid organizations, including the military and academic cultures in PME. Those same issues persist today.

Differing Cultures

Military officers are constantly being inculcated with critical leadership traits for their operational careers. They are also, however, taught that their leadership skills enable them, with enough training, to do any job. In PME, that means pilots, ship drivers, and logisticians find themselves going from an operational deployment one week to a classroom the next. As Dr. Howard Wiarda, who taught for many years at the National War College, has noted, this modular approach makes all faculty interchangeable, because of the assumption that “every officer is a teacher” merely by virtue of being an officer.¹¹ They confidently enter their classrooms, though sometimes with little knowledge about the subject they will teach, but often fully willing to voice strong views on substantive and educational topics. This attitude that “accomplished leaders can do anything” pervades PME institutions where credibility as an “expert” on a subject is often attained by simply declaring oneself to be an

¹⁰ John Hattendorf, et al., *Sailors and Scholars: The Centennial History of the U.S. Naval War College* (Newport, RI Naval War College Press, 1984), pp. 27-28.

¹¹ Wiarda, pp 70-75.

expert. (Civilian faculty are just as guilty of this, if not more so, but the basic problem is that the institutions allow it.) The black and white world of military officers, where achievement is measured on a daily basis and nobody questions authority, is completely different from the cultural milieu of their academic colleagues.

Academics are broadly trained in their fields, although they also spend years developing specializations. Their careers are designed to investigate open-ended questions which often do not have clear answers. They tend to build their reputations and complete their works through individual efforts. And while too many academics are not effective teachers, almost all of them believe that the best teachers have broad intellectual curiosity and should have the breadth to teach beyond that day's PowerPoint slides.

Within PME, these cultural differences play out in terms of work habits, definitions of productivity, and views on what constitutes education. For the military faculty daily productivity equates with being in the office for meetings, communal class preparation, and *constant* availability for student consultations. Academic indicators of productivity cover a wide range of activities: meeting with students during arranged hours, individual class preparation, maintenance of an active research agenda, preparation of new lectures, conference presentation, publication commitments, and an open expectation of peer critique. Academics plan their work in year or longer blocks, and advocate a broader, open-ended, cumulative educational model. Conversely, the views on education by active-duty and retired military faculty lean toward a training-like model, using daily critiques, right and wrong answers, metrics and a requirement to learn a limited amount of material only once.

Certainly, the very existence of this entire discussion is healthy sign. Even ten or fifteen years ago, criticisms of PME were basically taboo. Self-contained Brigadoons, the war colleges could ignore the isolated critical article or book. No faculty or student would risk retribution by raising criticism. Today, as the United States faces new enemies, there is, of necessity, more attention to education in the military. The new media gives individuals the platform to quickly disseminate critiques for improving the PME system.

Such openness creates a dilemma for military commands, which traditionally value a happy "command climate." Commands are supposed to reflect teamwork functioning at its best, and so administrators have vested interests in perpetuating the image that all is well. Thus, there are attempts to bury problems from sexual harassment to questionable hiring and violations of ethical boundaries, lest they reflect poorly on the command. I was once told, for example, that gender-related "hostile work environment" issues raised on a command climate survey were not being pursued because they were not statistically significant. That was technically true, but only because the number of women at the institution was, and is, so low—at least partly because of a perceived hostile work environment—that it resulted in a Catch-22: even if every one of them reported a hostile work environment, they would be only a

small fraction of the results, and so they are statistically insignificant. QED. This attitude, however, solves nothing and is a disservice both to the students, and the nation which pays faculty salaries and student costs at these institutions and expects results.

Who Oversees PME?

Consequent to Goldwater-Nichols, all military officers are required to complete Joint Professional Military Education (JPME) in two stages during the course of their careers, either in residence at approved service schools, or through distance education programs to be “drawn from” the residence program curriculum. JPME 1 is taught at intermediate service schools, and JPME 2 primarily at senior war colleges. Beginning in the 1980s, war college programs have also awarded accredited graduate degrees. The decision to award a Master’s Degree was the result of several factors, including the Congressional intent to wed academic rigor to military education, the need to signal the purpose of the colleges, and the student demand that a year of study merited a degree.

Accordingly, two bodies are responsible for accreditation of the war college academic programs. On the military side, there is the Process for Accreditation of Joint Education (PAJE) review, in which the DoD internally examines the colleges every six years to “certify” they are meeting the obligations set out in the Officer Professional Military Education Policy (OPMEP), established by the Joint Chiefs. Teams of PAJE accreditors visit each war college, and assess the school and its curriculum, and make recommendations for improvement.

Two issues impede the effectiveness of the PAJE process, however. First, the teams are largely made up of faculty from other PME institutions, who have a vested interest in finding that “all is well” so that teams from other schools will report the same during reciprocal visits. (They also would be responsible for coming up with alternatives if things were not satisfactory, a thankless task few accreditors want.) Second, the 130-plus page OPMEP “instruction” is the military education equivalent of a checklist, like the ones that get a ship underway or launch an air assault. The checklist includes common educational standards, a taxonomy of desired learning achievements, learning objectives, learning areas, requirements for faculty and student percentages from the different services, and other “guidelines,” all of which perpetuate a “training” versus “education” approach. Second, these teams are created *ad hoc* for each visit, and when they do examine a school, it is only for about a week. The teams are provided reams of reading material in advance, detailing how the schools are meeting the hefty requirements, but sometimes, these materials have clearly not been read before arrival. Understandably, the PAJE committees spend their time primarily reviewing numerical information that they can most easily verify, rather than trying to make qualitative

judgments about the quality of education. But even the quantitative indicators can be misleading: student-faculty ratios, for example, are an important marker, but often skewed because numerous administrative positions are carefully categorized as faculty, even if they involve little or no teaching. In the end, the whirlwind PAJE week is part ceremony and part box-check. The team, in fact, spends a good part of its time on site writing the draft of their final report, so that the expected good news can be delivered on the last day of their visit.

On the civilian side, the degree programs at the war colleges are reviewed by the same regional bodies that accredit other colleges and universities in their area, such as the New England Association of Schools and Colleges and its counterparts. The civilian academic overseers responsible for reviewing the degree programs every ten years perform much the same way as the PAJE teams. They are provided similar stacks of glossy binders, which are impossible to read carefully in a short time. They then arrive and rush through the checklists and minor points of administrative process, consider such items as the administrative organization chart, the impact of having a new president every few years, and whether or not there is a faculty senate. These and other issues that would be important in civilian schools (which are run by the faculty) are mostly irrelevant in an environment with contracted, rather than tenured, faculty. Moreover, civilian accreditors are unfamiliar with the vernacular of war colleges, and are understandably dazzled by the efficiency of the military, given the general disorganization of civilian colleges. Like their PAJE counterparts, they too are happy to sign off on a tacitly pre-determined final product.

Unfortunate as it is to say, the existence of these valuable M.A. programs at the war colleges has spawned repeated complaints from senior military leadership and Defense Department bureaucrats that graduate degrees are “gold plating” i.e. going beyond JPME requirements, requiring additional curricular material only to satisfy the academic accreditors. This is patently false, but it is a common canard by administrators or military officers who want to shorten, simplify, or eliminate PME programs. In the case of the Naval War College, the first PME school to be accredited, the courses as they stood were presented to academic accreditors, who agreed that they were degree-worthy and accredited the program in 1984.¹² Whatever issues there may be with the accrediting process, nothing was ever added or changed to meet those standards.

Other war colleges subsequently sought accreditation for a variety of reasons. On a practical level, most found that students were determined to get a degree one way or another, often enrolling in night programs at local colleges and universities. Since there was (and still is) little chance of failure at the war colleges, the students naturally focused most of their attention on

¹² <http://www.usnwc.edu/Academics/College-of-Distance-Education/Frequently-Asked-Questions.aspx>.

satisfying the degree requirements at the civilian schools in order to gain the degree that they correctly thought was going to be more useful over the long-term, than a sure-thing JPME box-check that only meant something to their services.

In all fairness to both accreditation groups, they come with a checklist for review, and they follow it. They do not have the time, or the mandate, to look into such issues as how the institution defines education, why the faculty are not involved in the educational process at higher levels, the existence of questionable personnel practices, or whether the students have backgrounds that could get them through the rigorous admission processes and courses in programs like the Fletcher School or the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies that the war colleges generally consider to be their peer institutions.

Congress and the individual services also have roles in PME oversight. Congressman Ike Skelton championed and closely followed PME issues for many years, though since he lost his seat in 2010 nobody else has taken it up as a personal cause. Occasional hearings are held, but Congress these days understandably has bigger fish to fry than what goes on at war colleges. Service interest in the war colleges varies, and with varied impact. Close attention from the services is a mixed blessing; as one Army War College faculty member once wryly put it “The good news is that the Army loves its War College. The bad news is that the Army *really* loves its War College.”¹³ The Air Force has also shown considerable interest in the Air War College, and not always to its benefit. While I was at the Air War College, the Air Staff often dictated specific curricular input, sometimes resulting in such a disjointed curriculum that a visiting civilian academic once described it as being executed by a faculty so disconnected from what they were teaching that they were “dead men walking.” The Navy, on the other hand, as a traditionally deployed service with a focus on operations, left curriculum development at Newport to the faculty, with better results.

The Faculty: Military Officers

Since any college is only as good as its faculty, it is appropriate to start there to get a sense of institutional and organizational problems. Although PME faculties are composed of civilian and military members, it is often difficult even to define those categories: a careful look at the “civilian” faculty roster in PME faculty positions would reveal that many are actually retired military officers who walked out in uniform on Friday and returned in civilian clothes on Monday. This is because military officers can retire while still quite young, draw a full pension immediately and go right back to work, many on

¹³ This comment was made to an NWC faculty member during a conference on war college teaching methods in 2003.

the government payroll. This questionable and expensive practice was targeted for overhaul by former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates.

While the effects of this retirement policy are far-reaching across the Department of Defense, the result in PME is that many active duty military members assigned to war colleges make the circular argument that they are qualified to spend their retirement teaching at a war college because they have already taught at a war college. This is especially problematic since the colleges have very little control over who is sent as military faculty members to their institutions in the first place. George Reed, a former career Army officer and PME professor who transitioned to civilian academia, wrote in 2011:

A central problem with staffing the war colleges stems from the fact that the colleges have little control of who the services assign there as military faculty members. The personnel system seems to believe that any old colonel can do it, but examples to the contrary abound. Assignments are made for a host of reasons that do not relate to one's ability or even interest in teaching. I remember one particularly egregious case where the Air Force sent an officer to teach at the Army War College who suffered from a noticeable speech impediment.

The real issue is that non-academic administrators, in practice, sometimes have used their flexible hiring authority to circumvent merit-based hiring in general, and instead hire those loyal to maintaining the status quo, including many active duty military hired directly from the twilight military tour into civilian faculty positions.

Civilian war college faculty, unlike most other government employees, are not part of the General Schedule (GS) civil service system (Title 5 of the U.S. Code), but instead are hired under the ostensibly more flexible Title 10, which has fewer explicit requirements for hiring and firing. In theory, this provides the government the ability to change faculty as needed under various circumstances. This means that faculty work on short term contracts—anywhere from one to four years, and up to six years at institutions like West Point—and can be refused contract renewal for almost any reason. Title 10 positions are not always advertised or competed, and people are sometimes hired into a vacancy quickly, and replaced when their services are no longer required.

There is an underlying logic to this: if experts on European integration were hired when the Berlin Wall fell, but those same positions needed to be filled later by counterterrorism specialists after 9/11, there would be the flexibility to make that change and eliminate “dead wood.” In practice, however, that is not how academics approach their profession, nor how colleges manage their faculties. All professional schools create chairs and programs for topical issues, but they do not consider a faculty member who is not the “flavor of the month” the equivalent of “dead wood.” (Academic faculty are “dead wood” when they no longer choose to maintain active engagement with their field, and cease publishing or developing new courses.) Moreover, some of the retired military faculty have no evident area of specialization nor do they appear

interested in developing one, negating the “dead wood” rationale for refusing contract renewals. Regarding the retired military faculty, again George Reed explains:

Retired officers are a mixed bag. They are often completely dedicated to the institution and bring a lifetime of experience, but without a deep underlying reservoir of disciplinary knowledge and a strong desire to stay connected and contribute to it, they can get a bit stale. They rarely leave voluntarily and the administration rewards their loyalty, if not their contributions, by renewing their contracts. Their experiences have a shelf life that begins to expire on the date of retirement. They can usually be counted on to run a good seminar, but few contribute much in terms of scholarship as measured by the usual indicators of research and publication. . . . They can be powerfully resistant to change as they wait out the “temporary help,” a reference to military personnel on three-year assignments that includes the most senior administrators of the institution.

Looking ahead to their impending retirement, then, officers will emulate these successful retirees and spend their last military assignment at the war colleges doing whatever is needed to assure a post at the institution after leaving the service, in general by demonstrating their reliability as guardians of the status quo.

This is unfortunate, because it obscures the fact that military faculty can—and do—play a vital role at war colleges. No other group can better calibrate the delicate balance between theory and practical material by bringing operational relevance to the curriculum and maintaining ongoing connections to operational commands. And without doubt, some officers are born teachers. Some are blossoming scholars as well; there should always be a place for these exceptional individuals. But others basically read PowerPoint slides to the students, tell sea/war stories (which some students prefer to rigorous discussion), and allow the students to chat with each other in a completely unstructured way in the name of “adult learning” among “peers.”¹⁴ Another trend exacerbating the civil-military culture gap is the increasing number of hires of military retirees into burgeoning administrative staff positions: the fleets of Deans, Assistant Deans, Associate Deans, Associate Provosts, Program Directors, Special Advisors, and “professors” with various titles, whose duties are unclear and who hold senior titles and influence on institutional policy but have little or no background in education. Often, these jobs are filled in questionable ways. Some are created, and the need identified, just as individuals retire; others are filled without fully advertising the positions, or as the result of “worldwide” searches which produce a particular officer, close to retirement, sitting down the hall as the only viable candidate.

The educational goals of the institutions are undermined by this use of the institutions as a jobs program. As war college administrations grow larger,

¹⁴This is a common mantra at PME institutions, which I encountered at both the Air and Naval War Colleges; for a similar description of National, see Wiarda, pp. 67-68.

they increasingly become preoccupied with the bureaucratic goal of self-perpetuation. This was empirically demonstrated in 2004, when the Naval War College hired a well-known consulting firm (at very high price) to consider institutional efficiency and return-on-investment at Newport, one of several contracts issued in those years. The consultants immediately noted the remarkably sudden and high growth of administrative positions, though the briefers were later persuaded to omit that finding from the final report. The study was relegated to a drawer.

The Faculty: Civilian Academics and Practitioners

On the other side of the civil-military equation, steps need to be taken to reform the recruitment and retention of civilian academic faculty. The best and brightest civilian academic faculty will rarely consider coming to an institution that cannot assure three things: (1) academic freedom, (2) a comprehensible career path, and (3) time to pursue the individual research that marks the standing of academic professionals in their field. The Naval War College has been a leader in this area, as its presidents and the Navy itself have defended a long tradition of academic freedom and original research. Other PME institutions have been less fortunate in this regard, thus less able to establish their own academic identity.

Every competent profession, academic or otherwise, requires a career path that is transparent and merit-based, but neither of these are given in PME institutions. I joined the Air War College as a senior Associate Professor, and subsequently applied for promotion to Full Professor which baffled the administration. As I later found out, no one knew how to promote academics to higher rank, because I was the first faculty member *not* to be hired as a Full Professor. (I was also the only civilian woman then on the faculty, which may or may not have been a coincidence.) Although I was promoted, the why and how were largely undisclosed. The Naval War College also lacked promotion procedures, and my colleagues and I met fierce resistance from retired military on the faculty when a merit-based career path plan was finally put forward in 2004. The retirees felt entitled to be hired as Full Professors based *solely* on their past military rank and bristled at any notion that they should do anything further to develop themselves as faculty once on board. At every turn, “Title 10” was invoked as rationale for sometimes dubious practices in hiring and awarding of academic rank.

Faculty at all of the war colleges have similar stories of the abuses of Title 10.¹⁵ For example, how well any faculty member has achieved the goals

¹⁵ At National, Wiarda was told point-blank that there would never be a tenure system of any kind because it would interfere with the Commandant’s ability, in effect, to do as he pleased with the faculty, who were all considered interchangeable, and many of whom he wished to frighten, intimate, or fire to make way for friends he wished to hire. See Wiarda, p. 109.

of the institution—and, therefore, how likely they are to be invited to stay on—should be reflected in their annual evaluation, which is one reason these evaluations are required. This should not be difficult or mysterious, but faculty trust in the system is undermined when perceived “trap doors” are built into faculty contracts, such as fuzzy requirements to “demonstrate a commitment to jointness,” “capture efficiencies,” or “challenge assumptions.” (How such a disempowered and timid faculty was supposed to challenge *anything*, much less DoD’s assumptions, was never explained when administrators added that kind of language to Newport’s contracts for a period.) All of this assumes the faculty member actually receives an evaluation, of course. I did not receive a written evaluation for six consecutive years, despite my repeated written and verbal requests, although my performance must have been satisfactory during this period as I was annually rewarded with bonuses, albeit without further explanation.

To its credit, the Naval War College, more than any other PME institution, adheres fairly closely to an academic tenure system, where faculty are essentially permanent after six years of service. Some fail to reach that mark, but they have at least some protections from arbitrary decisions afterward, including the right to challenge their dismissal. Faculty at other PME schools, however, report that they can be—and some have been—fired at will after years, even decades, as faculty, by capricious administrators and senior officers hiding behind opaque processes, with no explanation and no chance for appeal.

Finally, work schedules must allow time for accomplishment of actual scholarship and its associated products. This means recognizing that faculty need blocks of time for scholarly work that is not constantly sacrificed to the erratic “taskings” and time-consuming, but unproductive, office routines that are more appropriate to a low-level bureaucrat than to a top teacher and researcher. Faculty understand rank and hierarchy, but they are not junior officers or intellectual valets.

Civilian universities are not paradise, of course. To the degree, however, that war colleges emulate civilian schools, it is too often by replicating the dysfunctions found in the most mediocre civilian institutions. The rigid structure of PME, for example, means the youngest and brightest stars, if they can be convinced to join the faculty, will soon leave for more intellectually and professionally rewarding positions. Many of those who stay remain out of inertia, for the high salaries, or for lack of other opportunities. It is a truism that many academics do not “come” to PME so much as they “end up” there, although the war colleges have indeed made some fine hires by capitalizing on the brutally tight academic job market, and from the occasional mistakes of university tenure committees.

Still, the easy, training-style goals found in PME schools have a great attraction for civilian academics whose careers never took off (or sputtered out quickly), since predictable and repetitive teaching tasks relieve them of facing

any new challenges. Such faculty respond to the bureaucratic norms of the military institution and do only what is required to gain their next contract renewal, rather than remaining engaged with their external peers and adhering to the greater standards of their profession. They are often competent teachers, but cannot mentor younger faculty or help develop the institution itself. Much like the adjuncts on contract treadmills in lesser civilian schools, they can come to see themselves as contractors rather than faculty, and thus default to an occupational, rather than professional, model of academia, in which teaching is a job rather than a vocation.

Lastly, another category of faculty member has crept into the war college mix of late: practitioners. Practitioners are increasingly included in academic faculties for the specialization and experience that they can bring, and they are especially important in war colleges because of the increased need to pay attention to interagency issues. However, the need for practitioners on a long term basis is limited because these professionals are largely comfortable teaching only what they know—and what they know tends to be (as in the case of retirees) an asset that declines in value the longer they are away from their area of professional activity. While they bring crucially needed “fresh eyes” to the PME system, being neither academic nor military, their long-term value as faculty members may be undermined by a limited understanding of the academic enterprise of graduate military education.

The Students

Each service has a different attitude toward education, and consequently a different process for deciding who they send to the war college resident programs. It is not unusual for active duty military to be a faculty member in one war college department, and simultaneously a student in another, earning the same JPME credit degree as their students. The overall value of education, as reflected in an officer's career path, varies as well. The former commandant of the Army War College, Robert Scales, lamented the apparent deterioration of the value placed on PME in 2010:

Throughout the services officers are avoiding attendance in schools, and school lengths are being shortened. The Army's full-term staff college is now attended by fewer and fewer officers. The best and brightest are avoiding the war colleges in favor of service in Iraq and Afghanistan. The average age of war college students has increased from 41 to 45, making this institution a preparation for retirement rather than a launching platform for strategic leadership.¹⁶

The result, Scales argues, is that war colleges are now “intellectual backwaters;” at the least, the fact that a war college may be an officer's last assignment before

¹⁶ Scales, “Too Busy to Learn.” Proceedings, February 2010, <http://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2010-02/too-busy-learn>.

retirement casts doubt on how much anyone ever cared about the “return on investment” in an officer’s career. Scales argues for replacing all faculty at war colleges with active-duty officers, which is not a viable solution as it not only ignores the limitations of military faculty, but also contravenes the spirit of Goldwater-Nichols.

But the former commandant’s frustration is palpable, and understandable to anyone who has taught in PME. Navy students regularly report that they were discouraged from attending a war college in residence by their detailers or superiors, and warned that to do so would be detrimental to their careers. To say that this disdain for education among their superiors affects student attitudes would be understatement. Additionally, students are frequently told by their personnel officers and leadership that a year at the war college is a year to reconnect with families and relax. Rarely is it characterized as a year of rigorous study. Students are also happily aware that the “pass” rate for both JPME and receiving the M.A. at any war college is effectively 100 percent.

Consequently, the war college educational experience is often, for better or worse, only what the students make of it. To be sure, there are some who are dedicated students, who work hard, and intellectually grow during their time in residence. Students who were unlikely candidates for graduate study in the first place will pass with good grades alongside their more exceptional colleagues, with little distinction between their final records. Some, however, adhere to the unofficial but oft-quoted maxim of students at the Naval Academy: “if the minimum weren’t good enough, it wouldn’t be the minimum.” It has not helped when senior officers have over the years repeatedly joked from the stage of the Naval War College auditorium to the student body to remember that “it’s only a lot of reading if you do it,” or referred to the auditoriums at both Maxwell and Newport as “the big blue bedrooms.”

Another impediment in the classroom is that few military students have significant interest in any topic or subject not immediately related to their next assignment. War college curricula must be relevant to security practitioners at large, and prepare military officers to keep up with the best and brightest of their civilian peers in future assignment, but students, from pilots to chaplains, too often expect classes to be directly relevant to their next individual job. If they feel that their schoolwork is not directly going to help them in the next 18 months, they do not hold back their complaints, even though they cannot possibly fully know what will be “relevant” in the long arc of their careers.

Perhaps most significantly, PME institutions suffer from a problem that also plagues their civilian counterparts: they care too much about what the students like and want. In fact, it is worse in PME schools, because PME is organized around the notion that the students and faculty are *peers*—an idea no academic faculty member anywhere else would take seriously. Howard Wiarda noted in his recent memoir of the National War College that he had taught at many schools, but had never seen one so focused on the whims of

such “pampered” students as National, and he found it “laughable” that he was required to consider them his equals. The issue, he points out, was not whether the students had input to offer, but the inordinate fear among administrators that the graduates would one day punish the institution if their egos were bruised in any way:

Everything seemed to depend on whether the *students* were happy and satisfied. The reason for this, I was told by one of the deans, is that it's the students who, if unhappy for any reason, complain to the Joint Chiefs. The faculty cannot do that. . . .[or] the students will wait until they become generals and admirals. . . .and mete out their revenge then. [One commandant]. . .waited fifteen years to wreak his revenge on National for some real or perceived faults.¹⁷

Wiarda bitterly referred to this constant placing of the students “on a pedestal” above their teachers as a “chicken-hearted policy” that produced nothing good.

While his criticism is too scorching, Wiarda has a point about students' attitudes and the effect on education. Though brave leaders and professionals in their operational jobs, when officers come to PME, they become like most graduate students: tetchy. Individuals who once worked interminably long days at the Pentagon, or even have come under fire in the field, suddenly find it unbearable to take two exams in a week or to write an eight-page paper. Time becomes precious and expectations rise. Grades, as at the best civilian universities, inflate while the tolerance for work shrinks. As a department chair, I regularly held meetings with student representatives, where students often asked questions whose answers were easily found in the comprehensive syllabus they had been provided, but had not bothered to read. Perhaps most telling, a student once complained to me that he could not appropriately fill out the requested end-of-course evaluation on the course and faculty until after he had his grade, because if he didn't get an “A,” it was clearly the fault of the professor.

Students at the war colleges, far more than in civilian institutions, wield too much power over contract-dependent faculty and insecure administrators, to the detriment of the educational mission. Their input is crucial to improving the curriculum and should be solicited judiciously. However, they should not be dictating the educational goals and methods of PME institutions.

The Curriculum

A strong faculty can execute almost any curriculum, but even the best teachers cannot overcome poor materials and turn mediocrity into excellence. Although organized differently and called by various departmental names, all war colleges teach generally the same categories of material, dictated by the

¹⁷ Wiarda, p. 69.

JPME guidelines: strategic thinking, military history, leadership, national security affairs, and joint military operations. How these general categories get translated into curricular sessions for execution, however, varies widely—which goes back to the training versus education dilemma. Execution varies significantly as well: some schools and departments use a single teacher in the classroom for each course, others use team teaching where the course teaching load is shared, and others use team teaching with a post command military moderator and civilian academic in the classroom for each session. The balance between large lectures and seminar discussions also varies, as does the reading load. Reading assignments range from about 80 pages per night, to other cases where there are a dozen or more readings per session, sometimes in excess of 300 pages, which the students—and worse, some faculty—often admit they do not fully read.

A major difference between war colleges and civilian academic institutions is the “common curriculum” taught within each PME department. In civilian academic institutions, individual faculty develop and execute their courses in their entirety. War colleges develop curricula collectively, and faculty members may be responsible for the creation of two or three sessions of a 25 session course. The degree to which individualization in the classroom is allowed or encouraged varies. Sometimes, a set of ready-made PowerPoint slides is provided to the instructor, and little deviation from those slides is expected or encouraged, which usually sits well both with military faculty unsure of the subject matter and civilians who do not wish to expand beyond time-tested teaching notes.

The theoretical benefit of a collectively developed curriculum is that sessions are supposed to be developed by experts on the subject, and all the required OPMEP material is covered, while giving the entire faculty a sense of “buy-in” and engagement. But in practice, expertise can be a secondary consideration, as workload must be fairly distributed and a large breadth of subjects covered. And once a curriculum is developed, the temptation grows to resist further change, because it is easier to teach a roster of agreed-upon issues than to engage in continual and intellectually taxing change—especially if it is found that the students “like” a curricular topic or approach.

Appropriately, war colleges focus less on theory than counterpart civilian institutions. In PME, every attempt is made to maximize students’ learning experiences through case studies, seminar discussions and other methods known from experience in civilian professional schools (rather than purely academic programs) to tap into adult student strengths. But it is a fine line between maximizing the student’s learning experience, and sacrificing rigor for ease and “likability.” When training is equated with education, teamwork and harmony considered equally or more important than rigor and excellence, and education viewed as something anyone can become expert at with minimal preparation, education faces a slippery slope. PME academic leaders are too often told that military education is “different,” and

has a kind of “otherness” that academics need either to appreciate, or to leave the PME world. “Love it or leave it” is not a solution.

Recommendations

General Petraeus attended Princeton University and it served him well. But Princeton and its peers will never teach the required and highly specialized material available only in a War College. It is not their mission, and they would not do it well in any case. Furthermore, there is not nearly enough room at the nation’s elite universities—which currently take only a handful of military students and cannot take many more—for the *thousands* of officers who must, by law, pass through the PME system each year. Military education is not only indispensable, it is a Congressional requirement. Still, Princeton and other programs at SAIS, Fletcher, the Kennedy School and elsewhere have made an effort to look more like war colleges, including courses in grand strategy and national security. Why can’t the war colleges try to be just a bit more like Princeton, and a bit less like a training exercise?

When considering how to make the war colleges more effective, it should be remembered that first and foremost, the job of the war colleges is to educate students to make them better defenders of the United States of America and its interests and its allies around the world. Other missions are ancillary, even potentially distractive. Toward that goal, I put forward the following recommendations, a list that is by no means exhaustive, but a starting point for further discussion.

- Institutional mission priority, with all the affiliated time and resource commitments, should be given to educating the students to make them the equals to the best of their civilian counterparts in the defense community, as Admiral Turner insisted forty years ago.
- Active duty military officers are crucial to the PME mission, and should be the first choice to teach the courses on operational warfare, not former officers far removed from current experience.
- Hiring active duty military faculty immediately into civilian positions upon retirement should be reserved for exceptional officers who show great future promise.
- A tenure or tenure-like system for civilian faculty needs to be in place to force peer-reviewed productivity, prevent the accumulation of expensive academic “dead wood”, and to allow the senior faculty to cohere as a faculty so they can fully assist the PME system without fear of contract retribution.
- Faculty should be responsible for curriculum development, and held to account for the degree to which that curriculum is relevant

to issues of national security, rather than serving the narrow interests of political theorists or military historians.

- Academic freedom for faculty should be a fundamental principle of each war college institution to assure that students are challenged by the best minds the PME system can bring to bear.
- Programs should be in place regularly to bring practitioners to the war colleges, primarily for one or two year periods to share their specialized and current knowledge.
- Students should be prepared by their service leadership for their war college assignment to expect a year of intellectual challenge and rigor. Detailers who think their charges need some family time should suggest going somewhere other than a demanding graduate program that accomplishes in a year what most top universities require twice as long to finish.
- Likewise, students should be told in no uncertain terms that they are not the masters or owners of the schools. They should be made to realize the privilege of holding a graduate scholarship granted them by the people of the United States to study for a year on full pay and with no other obligations. If they do not appreciate that opportunity, they should seek assignment elsewhere.
- Administrative staff positions should be scrubbed based on necessity. If a position does not have a clear purpose, eliminate it. (One way to judge would be to ask if the institution functioned as well or better before the position was created.) If it passes muster, then hire for the position based on background and experience.
- Fiscal austerity may also require rethinking such practices as the advantages/disadvantages of one school or two schools to teach JPME I and II, and the costs/benefits of assigning senior military officers as adjunct team teachers—essentially, assistants, according to some past students and faculty—to civilian professors. Undoubtedly, sacrifices and change will be difficult.

Finally, if education and intellectual agility are the goals, then educators at PME institutions must be allowed to pursue the important task of getting students over their predilection for certainty and comfort, and for black and white issues with clear answers that always lead to easy and high grades. Professors must defeat this attitude, not play to it. The goal of temporary student happiness must be set aside. Military faculty and administrators in particular must also resist the natural urge to be overly sympathetic and want to mentor these younger versions of themselves, using training-friendly methods and approaches rather than rigorous educational standards. With the United States currently engaged in military actions around the world, a “war college” should be exactly that: both a college, and a serious preparation for the defense of the nation. As Stephen Luce described Newport, a war college

should be “A place for the study of war and of all questions of statesmanship related to the prevention of war.” That means a year of hard and necessary study, and not primarily a continued exercise in building student self-esteem. That was one of the goals of Goldwater-Nichols—and it is within reach if we are willing to recommit to the vision put forward in it 25 years ago.

